

MIKE DICKENS

Summary: Michael Dickens, longshoreman tells Betsy Peterson about the camaraderie between workers on the waterfront. He talks about the gang system adopted during hiring, how he started off doing very labor intensive work and the reshuffle of seniors during the merging of the labor unions.

01:00

Michael Dickens. Born in 1955, Oct 20. Grew up in Pasadena. Lived there till mid 30s. Then moved to Deer Park. Family of 5 children.

Dad worked on the waterfront. Worked from 1959-1989. Did everything. Began as a longshoreman, winch-man, crane operator. Did not think would end up in the waterfront. Wanted to go away to college. Began career as a longshoreman.

In 73-74 starting wage was \$5.65. So thought money was good and since brothers and father worked there, stayed on the waterfront. Did the same things as father did. Work was fairly hard as a new person.

7:00

Lot of uncertainty in the first few days of the job. Qualified for seniority that is 1200 hours during the first year on the waterfront. That is the threshold to make seniority. Had to pay a fee of \$125 to join the union. Qualify for seniority means you get benefits like healthcare, dental care.

First ever job was working the drums which are barrels with oil or chemicals. Bagged goods, 110 pound sacks. Very labor intensive and hard work for the first few years. Shipping containers started in the port of Houston sometime around 57-59. Cut back on man hours because of automation.

If work was too slow would do just about anything including cutting trees down for people, odd jobs. Whatever it took to get by. Would check in at the union hall a lot to try and get work. There were week when there was a lot of hours and there were weeks when there was just 4 hours.

12:00

Standard hiring hours at the union hall. 7, 8am. Have added 10am, 1pm, 3pm and 7 pm and 10pm and a midnight one in the last 15-20 years.

A business agent in the union hall would take orders. Two hours before the start time they have to place orders. It would posted on the recorder. It was also written down on the board. The business agent would place orders. The foreman would know how many people needed to be hired. The gang are 35% less than what they used to be. Automation has changed a lot of things. Manning has reduced over the years.

More non union labor now then ever before. 8-10 different unions that are non ILA. Break bulkers have not had any wage increase in the last 25 years due to competing. they make 25-30% less with no benefits.

18:00

for the first 6-7 years worked labor intensive cargo. 15 hours a day and worked on a lot of ships. made most money working the bags. Steel jobs. Ship load of pipes, high beams, rope coils. Majority was pipes. Was dangerous working with steel all day. Though bags were harder it was safer. Not too many good choices till 7-8 years. 70% of job was labor intensive.

Learnt on the job, was taught by others. Rolling drums. how to roll drums without hurting your back.

Lot of training was for labor intensive jobs that are not there today. Due to containerization and automation. Job Training for truck driving and crane operating. Training facilities are organized through the West Gulf Maritime Association. truck driving area where yard will be set up where people can practice, fork lifts, lashing. For hands on training. Gives fundamentals.

23:00

Would get other jobs to supplement income when times were tough. Most of these jobs did not pay any better. Made additional money only as a foreman. Would pay a dollar more an hour.

Automated cargo would pay better, get a break in between. Loads containers onto ships. Paceco or yard crane. Can do in 8 hours what used to take 3 weeks.

Got involved in the union after friend suggested running for office for the post of recording secretary/fill in business agent. Ran for office and got it.

27:00

Would shake hand and thank for support. How you treat people and how you do your job lets people know whether to keep you in office or not. Union elections are done every 2 years. 2-3 people would run for office. Must know or feel that it is what you want to do. Have to serve for a few months just to see what it is all about.

As a recording secretary/business agent, would take minutes and then fill in for the other two business agents on the weekend. On weekends it was a 14 hour day, though would only get paid for 8 hours. Privilege of being an officer at that time. Paid better. Had good business relations with all the people. Would take all the work orders. was part of the hiring and handled everything to do with the union outside of being the leader of the union. Always had a business agent in close contact with all the members.

31:00

Had longshoreman skills and people skills . Was very antiquated. More about organizational skills than technological ones. Business agents were not needed to be computer literate.

Became secretary in 1984. Was a lot of anxiety when the locals merged. It took the merger and took awhile before everyone got comfortable with each other. Lot of anxious moments for the first 6 months to a year. Thought they would be major issues. Over time it seemed to settle down. But after 28-30 years it still hasn't settled down completely. Some tension but no fights. Lot of people left the waterfront.

35:15

There were different rules within the locals. When there came time to merge it caused more confusion. Seniority system. Sections were all for five years. Made a good competitive workforce. When it changed, lost a lot of credibility and it has almost become all about hiring a number.

40:40

3-5 foreman worked for all the time. Gave a sense of stability. Committed to a few gang foreman. Same group of people worked together most of the time. Started this system in the 80's and has made the workforce more proficient.

44:20

Would have been a gold star 7 years ago. Now in section 37 out of 50 sections. Younger people feel like they can't move up fast enough. Unique place to work.

46:45

There has always been nepotism on the waterfront. Harder for new people to come in. Not quite as enticing. Have to work every chance they could to try and get into a core group. 80% is core group oriented. Different scenario. Hard to get started.

49:10

Elections. was in Local 24 for 29 years. Have conventions.

53:00

Relationship of district to locals. Mostly pretty good. Locals have better respect to the district officers. Sometimes is difficult to relate to younger people. Minor strike in the 80s and before that in the 70s. Only been part of one strike in 37 years.

55:25

Have two sons, both been trying to work on the waterfront.

Work is different but clerks and checkers. Always said clerks and checkers did not work as hard as longshoreman did. they use a lot more computers.

58:30

Technology going to affect us all. Will be seeing more automated facilities. Automation and containerizations essence. Already experience computers taking over jobs from people. Becomes more expensive, lot of cost to update and keep up with technology. Never going to stop technology, but can prolong it from happening. be the very best at what you do and be cognizant of it.
Automated terminal - Norfolk, Virginia.

1:04:00

Working on the waterfront has been everything. Would work hard in the day. Always left with a sense of pride after the day's work. Been blessed. Served as officer for 18-19 years at local 24. Then got appointed as representative for this District Office.